

Magic After Midnight

By C. Gockel

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About the Story

The wicked stepmother is about to meet her match.

Foreword

This is a standalone short story that was designed to be read without any previous reading of *I Bring the Fire* or *After the Fire*. However, for fans of those series, it takes place after events of Ragnarok, and the fall of Asgard.

Chapter 1

“Are you sitting down?” the voice at the other end of the phone asks.

Feeling herself go cold, Marcia pushes a chair away from the table, and slowly eases into it. Marcia exhales. “I am now,” she whispers. Why, oh, why, had she picked up the phone? Because she’d expected it to be Cindy ...

“It’s inoperable, I’m sorry. If you need— ”

“Mom!” Joshua calls from the bathroom. “Mom, Alicia is going to do your hair.”

“I have to go,” Marcia says.

She takes a deep breath and smells the reek of trash, the trash that Cindy was supposed to take out.

“Ma’am— ”

“I’ve worked in an oncology department for the last ten years, I know what this means,” Marcia says quickly. *Why did I have to answer the phone?*

“Mom!” Joshua calls again.

Marcia hangs up, and walks the short distance through the apartment to the master bath. Alicia and Joshua beam at her as she walks in. Maybe it’s the perfect vanity lighting, making their skin exceptionally golden and their dark eyes sparkle, or maybe it is the soul-crushing news casting the moment in sharp contrast—their health next to her illness—but they look especially beautiful and handsome. Alicia is wearing a green silk sheath dress with an amazing gold and pearl belt. Joshua has dyed his roots purple and the ends pink. He is wearing a gray suit with pink triangle cufflinks, a blue shirt and a lighter gray—what had he called it? A choke tie. Something that is popular in the realm of Vanaheim—or is it Svartálfaheim, land of the dwarves? Her children are so perfect, and Marcia laughs despite everything, or perhaps because of everything. She feels tears come to her eyes and spill over.

“Mom, what’s wrong?” Alicia asks, a brush in her hand. Her thick dark hair is upswept and held back with pearl pins. Her dark eyes are wide and caring.

“It’s the suit,” Joshua says, “I shouldn’t have worn dad’s suit, but it’s in style again, Mom, and you said ...”

She shakes her head and hugs him. “No, no, William would have wanted you to wear it.” The suit Joshua had worn just a few months ago no longer fits, as his shoulders seemingly grew three inches broader overnight. When the surprise invitation had come, he’d turned to his father’s—stepfather’s—old clothes in desperation. After some adjustments, the suit fits surprisingly well, and hides the fact that Joshua doesn’t have a lot hanging on those wide shoulders.

Turning to Alicia, Marcia says, “And you look beautiful.” She feels tears hot on her cheeks again. Her daughter is slouching; she always slouches. Marcia isn’t sure if that is due to the weight of the world on Alicia, her oldest, most responsible child, or if Alicia just feels eclipsed by her siblings. Cindy is more conventionally beautiful, and Joshua is so loud. Maybe it’s both. Marcia swallows. The cut of Alicia’s garment is just right for her broad shoulders and arms toned by swimming. And the green is beautiful against her golden skin. Marcia says to her son, “You did such a wonderful job on the dress.”

Joshua flushes from his neck to his forehead. “I told you those curtains were worth keeping.”

“Mom, you’re still crying,” Alicia says.

“I’m just emotional,” Marcia says, wiping her eyes and silently willing, *don’t ask, don’t ask*.

Alicia’s brow pinches, but she gestures to a stool in front of the mirror and says, “Sit down.”

Marcia takes a seat and Alicia starts brushing her hair back. The dress Marcia wears is something she pulled out of the closet from better times. Joshua had declared that the floor length black gown “doesn’t match Alicia’s green, but at least it is so old it is new again.” Marcia frowns at the lines at the corners of her mouth, around her eyes, and in her forehead. She looks as old as she feels. She glances up at her children. Joshua is just fifteen, Alicia is only seventeen. They’re too young to lose their mother so soon after losing William. She closes her eyes. Oh, but they’d lost more than that. Marcia’s first husband had died when they were five and three. William had been like a real father to them ... to lose two fathers, and now a mother.

“That gray streak through your black hair makes you look like Cruella Deville.”
Joshua cackles. “Fits your evil stepmother reputation.”

Marcia’s eyes spring open.

“Joshua,” Alicia hisses, tugging Marcia’s curls tight against her head.

He flicks a wrist. “She knows I’m only joking.”

Marcia’s phone rings. Joshua looks over at the counter where she’d put it down. He scowls. “Speak of the devil ...”

“Cindy’s not the devil,” Marcia says. “She’s—”

“Going through a tough time,” say her children in unison.

“Pick it up,” Marcia says, wiping her eyes.

Sighing, Joshua picks it up and walks out of the bathroom.

Arranging Marcia’s hair into a bun at the nape of her neck, Alicia asks, “Is your stomach feeling better, Mom?”

“Yes,” she lies. She smiles and more tears fall out of her eyes. What is she going to do? Can she make it just three more years, to see all her children come of age? Who will look after them if she doesn’t?

Joshua tromps back into the bathroom, rolling his eyes. “Cindy’s hair-styling-dress-fitting date with her fairy godmother is running late and she’s going to take her godmommy’s chariot to the ball.”

“At least we’re still invited,” Alicia says.

Joshua snickers. “We still get to embarrass our stinking rich snobby relatives!” He fist bumps Alicia. “Ugly step-sister powers activate!”

Marcia’s eyes go wide, and not at her son’s declaration of himself as a ‘sister.’
“You’re not the *ugly* step-sisters!”

Alicia huffs, “Of course not, Mom. Fairy tales aren’t real.”

* * *

“Mom,” Joshua says, “you’re losing weight again.” He picks at the dress as they walk through the grand foyer of Marcia’s in-laws, or former in-laws, or whatever you call the family of a widow when the controlling members of said family never really liked her. “I should have taken it in.”

“It’s fine,” Marcia says. Normally she would bat his hand away, but she’s too tired. She tells herself not to think of what that exhaustion means as they walk toward the main reception room and the buzz of conversation.

“I know that we’re probably only here because some event planner made a mistake on an invitation that was probably only supposed to be for Cindy,” Alicia whispers.

Marcia’s jaw sags. She’d actually thought exactly that ... but her children had begged her to accept the invite. She’d thought they’d thought the offer had been genuine.

“But I’m still so excited!” Alicia gushes. “We’ll probably be hustled off to a corner like the last time we were here, but still—”

“We’ll be the only people at school who’ve seen Night Elves up close,” says Joshua, his voice bubbling with excitement.

Marcia rubs her temples, partly at the memory of the last time, partly because she feels like crying again and wants to hide her eyes. She has to give them this. One last night of excitement, hope, and magic. Not everyone gets to meet elves, even since the opening of the realms. They tend to remain in Alfheim. But the Night Elves, a minor kingdom allied with the Light Elves, are interested in trading minerals ... for what, she’s not sure. Clutching her side, she rubs her temples ... her wealthy, well-connected in-laws made their fortune in commodities futures; of course they’d have maneuvered to have the Night Elves come to call.

They step into the reception room, the swirl of voices, and the press of bodies. Her flamboyant son whispers dramatically, “Oh, my God. I think I just got pregnant.”

Alicia gasps. “They’re ... they’re ...”

Marcia drops her hand from her face. She looks around. There are male and female elves intermingled through the crowd. They have pointed ears and too-perfect faces. They’re tall, elegant, dressed in silk brocades that are elegant and alien and ...

“They’re beautiful,” Alicia whispers.

“Vampires,” Marcia whispers at the same time. She can see fangs peeking between their lips as they speak, plop hors d’oeuvres in their mouths, and take sips of their wine.

“Beautiful,” Alicia whispers.

Joshua snorts and whispers, “We know our stepfamily are all bloodsuckers. Don’t worry, Mom, we’ll be careful.”

Alicia sighs and squeezes Marcia's arm. "How could Dad have been so nice when his family is so evil?"

They hadn't all been evil. William's parents had been lovely ... but since her mother-in-law was put into a nursing home, and her father-in-law's passing, the fortune had fallen into the care of Cindy's godmother. Marcia doesn't remind the children of this. She's too petrified. Is she hallucinating? She turns slowly in place, dreading what she might find—that she is going mad, or that her hallucinations are real. She finds herself staring at a man standing so close he could reach out and touch her. He's one of them, tall, with olive skin and dark hair curling in ringlets around his pointed ears. His eyes are light brown flecked with yellow, and his cheekbones are very sharp. His lips are slightly parted, as though in surprise, and his fangs are glinting in the light. He must have heard her. Swallowing, she takes a step back and blinks.

And the fangs are gone ...

She's hallucinating. The news of her disease has sent her into shock. She has to hold it together, just tonight. One more night.

"Yoo-hoo!" an older woman cries from behind Marcia.

Alicia grumbles, "And here comes Cinderella and her fairy godmommy."

"Stop calling her that," Marcia says, weakly stamping her foot.

Alicia and Joshua have already turned around.

"Oh, my God," Joshua whispers. "Those are Vera Wang gowns made with elven silk. My heart just broke. I feel so shabby; I think I lost my insta-baby."

"She looks beautiful," sighs Alicia resignedly. And there is no doubt that Cindy is beautiful. Along with her blonde hair, she has enormous blue eyes, a delicate nose, and a mouth shaped like a bow. And Cindy knows she is beautiful. She often complains that, if she were "just a little taller," she could be a model.

"You both look beautiful too," Marcia protests. She tries to turn, but feels a sharp pain in her side. She takes a breath.

"It's okay, Mom." Joshua says. "We're not the kind of girls who get swept up by Prince Charming. We've accepted our fate ... but we can enjoy the ride."

Putting a hand to her side, Marcia manages to turn, and there is Cindy with her aunt and godmother, Deidre. Cindy is wearing a gown of sky blue that glows with unearthly

magic. It has a diaphanous white train that flutters like a cloud. Above the sweetheart neckline her pale skin and golden hair are like the sun. Deidre wears a dress of black that seems to have stars woven into the fabric. Above the black, her silver hair is like the moon. Even next to elves, the two seem celestial. Marcia bites her lip. What a world her children are coming of age in; one where magic is real. Their possibilities seem endless.

Seeing Marcia's threesome, Cindy and Deidre walk over. They're not six feet away, when, looking at Alicia's dress, Cindy exclaims, "You're wearing our *old* curtains!" Her voice is so loud it rises above the gentle murmur of the crowd. Marcia feels all eyes on Alicia. Her daughter's shoulders slump further. Marcia closes her eyes and reminds herself that there is a fifty-fifty chance Cindy didn't mean to be hurtful.

"That suit and that dress look familiar," Deidre says. Marcia opens her eyes to see Deidre looking her up and down with a clear expression of disdain on her face.

"Real class never goes out of style," Marcia says through gritted teeth.

"Burnnnnnn ..." whispers Joshua, but Marcia notices his eyes are a little too wet after the curtain comment.

Deidre sniffs. "If you say so." Guiding Cindy away, Deidre says, "Cindy, let me introduce you to the prince."

The three of them watch them walk off, and Alicia gulps. "You were right, Mom, they really are vampires."

Marcia hears a cough. Her eyes slide to the side, and she sees the man she'd seen before. His gaze meets hers, and for an instant she has x-ray vision. She can see his fangs behind his lips. She gasps and blinks. And then he is gone.

* * *

Marcia sits just outside the main reception area, now filled with people dancing. She is in a hallway open to the back veranda, behind a potted plant, on a chair one of the very nice waitstaff have brought for her. She looks at her watch. It's only 11:50, but she wants to go home. She peers beyond the plant and sees Joshua and Alicia dancing the foxtrot. They look like they're having a grand time, and she doesn't want to make them leave. They're doing quite well on the floor—William had insisted they learn ballroom dancing—but they're getting a wide berth from all the guests. She supposes that Night Elves are as skilled as Deidre's usual hanger-ons at sensing riff-raff. She feels bile rising

in her stomach. Magic doesn't seem to be so much a possibility for her children, so much as another world of privilege they don't belong to. She closes her eyes ... no, she'd made it without money or magic before. She'd been born poor, made it into the middle class with her first husband, Alicia's and Joshua's father, and managed to hang onto that after he died. And then she'd met her second husband, William, Cindy's father, in a bereavement group and somehow wound up very wealthy ...

... and then the realms had opened up and a deranged Norse God had destroyed several blocks of Chicago. William, their business, and their home had been literally crushed in an instant. She'd lost her husband; the children had lost their father. Money would have been a cold comfort at that time; still, it would have allowed Marcia to take time off to help her children recover from their grief. Unfortunately, insurance policies had exemptions for 'acts of God.' She's just barely hanging on now, with a mortgage for a destroyed home to pay, her rent, and four mouths to feed. But things will get better. She scrunches her eyes shut. No, they won't, because she won't be alive ...

Marcia bites her lip. After all that 'magic' had done for her, why has she brought her children here? She'll round them up, and take them home. She looks past Joshua and Alicia for Cindy. In tow with Deidre, Cindy has been fawned over by the vampire prince the whole evening. Marcia shakes her head. He is not a *vampire* prince—he is a Night Elf. Marcia blinks out at the reception area. She sees Deidre, but where is Cindy?

From the veranda, she hears a splash of water, and a laugh that is familiar. Marcia goes cold. The pain in her side is suddenly screaming, but she bolts from her chair, and moves as quickly as she can out the door, and into the warm night.

Down a long flight of steps, she sees Cindy, sitting on the edge of a fountain, the dark hair of the prince a shadow against her neck. It might be the pain in her side, or the earlier hallucinations, but Marcia runs to the top of the stairs, and shouts, "Don't hurt her!"

The prince raises his head. Cindy turns to Marcia and her jaw drops.

Behind Marcia a masculine voice says, "You heard her, Rayne."

A sneer forming on his handsome features, the prince narrows his eyes at the masculine speaker behind Marcia.

“She’s only sixteen,” Marcia gasps, as though that could possibly make a difference.

The prince’s eyes bolt wide, and he gets up hastily. Without a backward glance at Cindy, he hops off the wall of the fountain, runs up the stairs, and bows to Marcia. “Madam, I apologize, I had no idea.” To the masculine speaker, he says some words in a strange musical language, and then puts his hand over his mouth and, turning visibly green, runs away. Marcia has a distinct impression he might vomit.

“You ruin everything!” Cindy hisses, charging up the stairs. “I hate you!”

And then she runs for the hallway. Marcia wants to go after her, but she’s suddenly dizzy with pain and her own nausea.

The man the prince had addressed sighs. “Teenagers.”

Clutching her side, Marcia lifts her eyes. It is the same vampire-Night-Elf-man she’d seen earlier. He looks all of twenty-eight. Maybe. She doesn't see fangs this time. She had been hallucinating, obviously.

“The years my children were teens ...” He shakes his head and crosses his arms, looking after Cindy.

The words seem out of place on his youthful face, but Marcia has heard rumors that elves are immortal.

She huffs, and says what she always says at these times. “They have four times the hormones of an adult. That makes them practically insane.” She shrugs and catches her breath.

“That is a very generous interpretation of their situation.” He smiles wryly and says, “It was the worst century of my life.”

Marcia blinks at him, thinking of all the fights she’d had this year with Joshua and Cindy, and all the times Alicia had gone to her room, her face streaming with tears, unwilling to talk about it. “I have never considered the advantages of a short life,” Marcia says.

The corners of the man’s lips turn up. Bowing slightly, he holds out a hand, palm up. “Madam, you seem to require assistance.”

Marcia takes a step back, her hand fluttering to her throat. His eyes follow her fingers, his gaze intent, and she gasps. She sees the fangs, again. Frozen in place, she

looks down at the vampire's hand, and she sees ... an ending, and peace. And suddenly, that is what she wants so much. Her struggle isn't just with her emotional teenagers. It is dealing with their school, with the teachers who aren't helping Joshua deal with bullies, and with Deirdre, who fills Cindy's mind with tales of how deprived the girl is, but only wants Cindy when it is convenient for her. And it is Marcia's responsibilities to her extended family, her continuing battle with insurance agencies, and the specter of her disease looming over like a dark shadow.

She wants to take his hand, but instead she draws back. "I have to stay with my children," she says. *For as long as I can.* She still feels sick, her side still hurts, but she bolts from the veranda.

In the car not fifteen minutes later, Cindy screeches, "I lost my shoe!"

Chapter 2

The next morning, Marcia wakes up from where she sleeps on the couch, to the reek of garbage. Her cell phone is ringing. Seeing her brother's number, she picks up.

"Marcia," Fernando says without preamble, "the assisted living center is saying that you requested that I be given durable power of attorney for Mother and Father."

"Yes," says Marcia. "I need you to do that, Fernando, I'm—"

"My firm is going public," Fernando says. "I'm pulling eighty hours a week right now."

"What about Sarah?" Marcia says, referring to Fernando's wife. "She is staying at home; you have a nanny, and—"

"We can't have Sarah making medical decisions for our parents!" says Fernando.

"I like Sarah," Marcia says. "She—"

"Is too busy with our twins," says Fernando.

Marcia scrunches her eyes shut. "But I have—"

There is a light ping at the other end of the line and Fernando says, "It's my investors, I have to go." And he's gone.

Marcia puts her head in her hands. It's been years since she lost William, and she had thought she was used to it. She loved William. They may not have always been perfect together, but they were always on each other's team. Now she is playing solo, and the weight of his absence is suddenly so heavy she feels like she can't breathe. She sucks in a deep breath, to prove to herself she still can ... and is overwhelmed by the reek of garbage.

Throat tight, she gets up and goes to the kitchen. Alicia's and Joshua's doors are shut. Cindy is leaning against the counter, eating yogurt from the container, last night's makeup smeared down her face. She still looks gorgeous, but ...

"How can you eat with the reek?" Marcia asks.

Throwing her yogurt container in the sink, Cindy hisses, “Deidre says you were ridiculous,” storms out, and slams her door. Marcia should feel angry, but then she hears Cindy break down into sobs.

She feels her stomach churn. If she doesn’t take the garbage out, Joshua might, but he’ll complain about it the entire time. Cindy will call him a drama queen, he’ll say “pot, you’re black,” and the situation will go downhill from there. If Joshua doesn’t take the garbage out, Alicia will. She won’t complain, won’t say a word ... she’ll just do it. And for some reason, Marcia finds that scenario worse.

Sighing and holding her nose, Marcia opens the garbage can. A moment later she steps out of their apartment and pads down the hall in her pajamas, her nose wrinkled, her stomach about to heave, carrying a stinking, dripping bag of fermented yuck. She’s almost at the door of the garbage chute when a voice behind her says, “Madam, may I help you with that?”

She turns, sees a man with fangs, screams, and promptly drops the garbage. The man swoops in, picks up the garbage, and points to the door Marcia was just about to go into. “Is that the rubbish chute?”

She nods dumbly. It’s the same man-vampire she’d spoken to last night, the one with the teenagers, not the one who’d tried to seduce her daughter.

The man-maybe-vampire disappears into the garbage room.

The door to Marcia’s apartment opens. Alicia hangs off the door frame into the hallway and demands, “Mom, did you take out the garbage again?”

Marcia darts for the door. Joshua’s indignant voice rises from within the apartment. “You made Mom take out the garbage!”

She hears Cindy angrily retort, “She decided to take it herself!”

Joshua roars, “Because you were too lazy and now the house smells like putrid chicken!”

“I’m sticking this piece of bubblegum in your sewing machine!” screams Cindy.

Feeling her stomach roiling, Marcia rushes past Alicia and says, “Shut the door!” Not pausing for breath she gasps, “Cindy, don’t you dare!”

“Ah, I see I have come to the right domicile,” says the man.

Marcia blinks. Cindy comes running out of Joshua's room with her brother in hot pursuit so fast that Marcia's head spins. She turns and finds the maybe vampire in the doorway. Alicia's lips are parted, her eyes are wide, and she's looking quickly between Marcia and the maybe bloodsucker.

"Mom," Alicia whispers. "I recognize him from the party. We shouldn't slam the door in his face."

Before Marcia can protest, the man asks, "May I come in?" He is definitely a vampire! Marcia can see his fangs when he talks.

Throwing up her hands, Marcia implores, "Don't let him—"

"Sure," says Cindy.

He steps in with a smile, giving Marcia an odd look. Alicia shuts the door behind him. Eyes wide, Marcia backs up. She tries to think of anything in the kitchen that might do as a wooden stake and gestures for Alicia to stand next to her. Alicia just looks at her quizzically.

"How can we help you?" says Joshua, rolling on his heels. Cindy elbows him. He elbows her back.

Marcia wonders if she can hit a wooden spoon against a counter hard enough to break it and give it a sharp point. She starts slowly edging toward the kitchen, motioning for Alicia to follow. Alicia's brow furrows, but she doesn't move. Marcia sucks in a breath. Normally, she thinks of her eldest child as the most perceptive one.

The vampire clears his throat. "I apologize for disturbing you. My name is Darerick Razvano ..." A long litany of syllables follows. He must see their slack jaws because he clears his throat and adds, "Please just call me Dare. I'll be working with the Night Elf embassy. First off, I want to return this." He opens a satchel and pulls out a package wrapped in blue tissue paper. Bowing to Cindy, he says, "Your shoe, madam."

Cindy smiles, puts a hand to her mouth, and walks forward to take it. Before she can, Marcia snatches it from his hand, and hands it to Cindy, glaring at the vamp. Cindy gives Marcia a dirty look, but then smiles at Dare and says, "And?"

The vampire opens his mouth as though to speak, and the fangs are there! Can't her children see them? Are they just blinded by how handsome he is, how other worldly?

"If you're here for Cindy's hand in marriage, take her," Joshua says.

“Joshua!” Marcia hisses, edging toward the kitchen.

“Pardon?” the vampire says, eyes widening, and skin flushing all the way to the ears. He’s deviously hidden their pointy tips behind his curls, Marcia notices. When her family’s bodies are found later, the neighbors won’t identify the man who entered their home as an elf.

Cindy doesn’t hear Joshua or doesn’t care. Blinking up at the vamp, she gushes, “The prince? Did he send you?”

The vampire’s jaw drops and he looks at Cindy. “Ah,” he says, and Marcia can see the exact moment he catches on to what she’s getting at. “He did not send me. I have business this way, and I thought I might return the shoe as well.”

Cindy’s face crumples. She bows her head, turns on her heel, walks to her room, and slams the door. Marcia has one kid out of the way; now, how to get the other two behind her? She gestures to Alicia again. “Mom, are you feeling alright?” Alicia asks.

The vampire looks at Marcia’s eldest daughter, and back to Marcia. “My primary order of business is to speak to you, madam. It is a matter of most urgent importance.”

Marcia says, “You’re—” She almost says *a vampire*. Catches her breath, and smells garbage, on her, and on him. It gives her pause. Had she ever seen a horror movie where a vampire helped take out the garbage?

“He’s a Night Elf, Mom,” Joshua says, in the same tone he uses to say, *you’re embarrassing me*.

“—not as dangerous as you perhaps think,” the vampire says, gold-flecked eyes on her.

The kids look between themselves and shrug.

The vampire takes a deep breath and adds, “The survival of my species is at stake.” He winces. “If you’ll pardon the expression.”

Marcia raises an eyebrow. The kids’ lips purse. After a long pause, Alicia says, “Mom, I think you have to help him.”

“Yeah, Mom, I don’t think the Sierra Club will ever let you back in if you refuse to save an endangered species,” Joshua adds.

Marcia glares at the vampire. He looks ... contrite? He’s in her home, and if he was going to attack them, wouldn’t he have done that by now? Also, it’s daylight, and he’s

out and about. Since the realms have opened up, humans have learned that a lot of the things they believed about magical creatures weren't true. Is it possible, vampire fearsomeness might be another myth? Or maybe he's not a vampire at all. Maybe he sucks the nectar out of flowers, or some such with those fangs. She huffs. No, she doesn't believe that.

Looking nervously to the side, he says, "We need to speak someplace private ... if you don't mind?"

Vampires in myths and movies don't talk nicely. They either bite you and drain your blood or use magic to control you and drain you later. Marcia swallows. There is only one place to talk that doesn't entail leaving her children.

"The balcony is private," she says.

He looks beyond her. "Ah, there?" he asks. The apartment is rather small.

Marcia nods. "Yes."

He raises his hands. "May I wash up first? My hands smell like putrid chicken."

More than anything, that makes Marcia think he might not be *immediately* dangerous.

Marcia points to the right. "Powder room right there." She watches him go in, and then glances at the balcony. It's early morning, but the balcony is western-facing, so there is no sun. Putting her hand to her side, she wonders if he gives up his right to entry as soon as he steps out. She also wonders if she can push him off the balcony.

* * *

The sun is slipping past its zenith. In another thirty minutes or so, it will clear the balcony above Marcia's and shine on her 'guest.' She feels vaguely sick, and it might be because she is, at a deep intrinsic level, very sick. And it might be because of all that Dare has told her.

"So you *are* a vampire," she says.

"We like to be called Night Elves," says Dare. He's sitting on the only other piece of furniture on her balcony, a fold-out chair that has a rubber lattice. He's too big for it, and his spotless Armani suit doesn't fit the cheapness of the chair any better. "Vampire conjures too many images of predators ..."

"... and you're more parasites."

“We prefer the term ‘symbiote,’” Dare says, grimacing.

Marcia narrows her eyes. “You haven’t exactly explained how you’re symbiotic.” He’d said that vampires require mammalian blood for survival, but not enough to be harmful to the host, unless the host is a very small creature, like a mouse. He’d also said, to *thrive* and be healthy, they need human blood. Not very much, he had assured her, and not even consistently—whatever nutrient they need from human blood they apparently can store for a long time. But without access to human blood, they eventually become infertile, ill, and often so depressed that they die. “Are gone” were the words he used to describe it. Still ... “Symbiotic implies some benefit to the host species. Not harming the host isn’t the same thing.”

Dare’s face goes blank for a moment. “I am not at liberty to divulge the benefit.” He smiles tightly, and gazes out at the parking lot across the street from her apartment. It might be Marcia’s imagination, but she thinks he looks sad.

“You can’t turn into mist,” she says.

He shakes his head. “Though it would be convenient.”

“You don’t convert anyone you bite into a vampire.”

He shakes his head.

Marcia huffs a soft laugh. “I always thought that wouldn’t work. The predator-prey relationship would never be balanced.”

“We prefer the term sym—we’re parasites,” he amends at Marcia’s sharp glance. “But it works the same way.”

Marcia looks at her knees; she’s still wearing her pajamas. “And you aren’t stronger than a human, faster, or able to enthrall us. And blood drawing is a consensual thing. Vampires feel a bond between themselves and their hosts and so wouldn’t want to jeopardize it?”

He’s quiet a moment, and then he says, “That all holds true ...” He bows his head and steeples his fingers. “... for most of us.”

Marcia raises her eyes. He meets her gaze. “All magical creatures: Night Elves, Light Elves, Dark Elves, Fire Ettins, Vanir, Jotunn, Aesir and the Dwarves ... they all possess some innate magic they can do without thinking. For Fire Ettins, it is the

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